

BUDDHISM AND MENTAL HEALTH

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Mental health is a priceless and invaluable possession which is an essential prerequisite for happiness and peace of mind in this modern world. But unfortunately today all too many are losing this most precious gift.

Despite the vast strides and starting progress made by science in unraveling the mysteries of the universe and providing the human race with material comforts and worldly needs, yet the paradox of it is that today more people are suffering from mental ill-health and personality disorders than ever before. It has been estimated that the percentage of neurotics and the mentally sick in present day society has assumed alarming proportions and is in need of psychiatric treatment.

But WHY? Is it natural to be mentally or emotionally ill? Modern Man has thought that if he could have high living standard, a good income, more leisure, education, and the freedom to do as he pleases, including sexual freedom, he would automatically be happy. Today more people are experiencing these conditions than ever before. And the result? “Instead of health, these conditions have led to an unprecedented increase of mental disease and even to new forms of mental disorder.....”

One of the chief causes of mental ill-health is that modern man is drifting hopelessly in this materialistic age, without any definite goal and purpose in life. He is completely overwhelmed and swept off his feet by the fleeting pleasures of this contemporary world and as a result is afflicted with mental and emotional disorders. The other reasons are the sense of insecurity arising from material needs! The feeling of instability engendered by excessive competition in commerce and industry, with booms, slumps, and unemployment; the fear of nuclear war the striving to keep up socially and financially with others; the vast disparity between different income levels combined with a general desire to adopt the manner of life of the more-privileged groups; sexual repression, all these and a host of subsidiary phenomena related to them are characteristic of our age. Not least among them as a disturbing influence is the need to feel personally important in a civilization which denies importance to all.

Though these external factors are partially responsible, yet according to Buddhist psychology the causes are deep-seated and far reaching and are found without a person's mind. Incidentally modern psychology draws a sharp line of demarcation between a normal and abnormal person. But according to

Buddhism all of us are subject to some form of emotional disturbances and psychological disorders most of the time. Suffering, which is the chief ailment afflicting all beings is not only physical suffering alone but predominantly psychological suffering in the form of frustration, worry, fear, despair, discord, agitation, irritation, and so on. The Buddha has made the significant and profound statement that a person may be physically healthy for one year, two years, ten years, twenty years, fifty years, a hundred years or more but except the Perfect Saints there is no one who is mentally healthy even for a second. From this statement of the Buddha it is clear that though many of us may enjoy good physical health for a number of years yet the fact remains that we are harassed and pestered throughout our lives by various types of anxieties, fears, worries and other emotional disturbances. The psychological factors which cause suffering are attributed by the Buddha to the five main causes which are as follows: Sensual Lust and Sex, Ill will, Sloth and Torpor, Restlessness and Worry and Doubts. The mind of a person afflicted with these mental defilements is graphically described in the Buddhist texts by the following similes: Sensual desires and Sex are compared with water mixed with manifold colours, Ill will with boiling water, Sloth and Torpor with water covered by mosses. Restlessness and Worry with agitated water whipped by the wind. Doubt with turbid and muddy water. Just as in such water one cannot perceive one's own reflection so in the presence of these five mental defilements one cannot clearly discern one's own benefit nor that of others, nor that of both as the mind is confused and mentally unbalance.

If the cause of suffering is mainly psychological, then it must follow as a natural logical sequence that the cure also is psychological. Therefore we find in Buddhism a technique and method a series of mental exercises or psychological treatment designed to cure the various mental diseases.

It is to cure the mental ailments of suffering humanity that the All Compassionate Buddha – the psychologist par excellence has given various prescriptions or forms of mental therapy (**Kammathanas**). The **Visudhi Magga** mentions six main types of temperaments (**Carita**) which include many lesser ones. They are those disposed to lust, hate, infatuation, faith, intellectuality and discursiveness. As dispositions differ so do the subjects of meditation (**Kommatthanas**). One comes across these subjects of meditation scattered in the Pali texts specially in the discourses – **Suttas**.

Though a particular type of meditation would suit a particular temperament, The Buddha being an Incomparable physician, gives subjects or meditation or techniques of treatment to individuals so that the various mental defilements which cause mental ill-health would be radically remedied. This technique and method of prescribing several subjects of meditation to an individual is clearly

brought out in the **Maha-Rahulavada Sutta** of the **Majjhima Nikaya**, a discourse which was preached to his son Rahula. The Buddha says:

- “Develop the meditation on loving kindness (Metta) Rahula; For by this ill-will is banished.”
- “Develop the meditation on compassion Rahula, for by this cruelty is banished”.
- “Develop the meditation on Altruistic joy Rahula, for by this envy or jealousy is banished.”
- “Develop the meditation on equanimity (Upekkha) Rahula, for by this restlessness is banished”.
- “Develop the meditation on the concept of impermanence Rahula, for by this pride of self is banished.”

Develop the concentration on mindfulness on in-and-out breathing Rahul: for in-and-out breathing with mindfulness, Rahula, developed and frequently practised, bears much fruit, and is of great advantage,”

An important fact emerges from this discourse and that is, that it is always better for a person to practise more than one type of meditation in order that he could effectively eradicate the deep-rooted and deep-seated diseases of the mind which continue to pester and harass him. However, he should assiduously practise and specialize in a subject of meditation which suits a predominant and dominant trait of his personality.

The discerning listener will observe that the first four techniques of meditation given to Rahula Thera are of immense practical benefit, individually and socially, in these days of stress and strain and when the rancor of hatred and the seeds of communal and racial discord rear their ugly heads, bringing in their wake much suffering, frustration, discontentment and personality disorders. Indeed these qualities are referred to in the Buddhist texts as excellent or sublime states of living (**Brahma Vihara**) as they constitute the right or ideal way of conduct or attitude towards living beings. The mind imbued with these noble sentiments will assuredly help one to overcome the frustrations, disappointments and irritations that beset one in his relationship with others. They are verily the great healers of wounds afflicted on us in the struggle for existence, the levelers, of social and racial barriers, the builders of harmonious communities and last but not least the promoters of human brotherhood. It is mentioned in the Buddhist texts that a person who cultivates such elevating and ennobling thoughts becomes the very embodiment and personification of these thoughts in course of time and lives verily here in this life itself as a Brahma God. For it is an acknowledged fact that the stature of a person is judged from

the quality of his thoughts. In fact what a person considers and reflects for a long time, to that his mind will bend and incline.

Further, these sublime qualities are highly beneficial and of practical significance because they are specific remedies for the eradication of hatred, cruelty, jealousy and restlessness which are the common failings in the context of modern society. According to Buddhism, hatred, cruelty, jealousy and restlessness have a natural tendency to make the mind narrow, limited and parochial in outlook, whereas these noble qualities make the mind immeasurable and boundless. The Buddhist texts describe a person who practises these meditations in the following graphic and vivid manner: Having his mind imbued with love, he abides pervading one quarter, likewise the second, the third, the fourth, above, below, around, everywhere, entirely he abides pervading the entire world with his mind imbued with love, with abundant, great, immeasurable freedom from hatred and malice. Having his mind imbued with compassion he abidesimbued with sympathetic joy.....with equanimity with abundant, great, immeasurable freedom from hatred and malice.

Just as if there were a lotus-pool of clear, sweet, cool water, limpid with good steps down on it, of charming aspect: if a man were to come from the East, overcome and suffering from the heat, exhausted, parched and thirsty, on coming to the pool he would quench his thirst and relieve his exhaustion from the heat. If he came from the West.....the North..... the South.....from wherever he came he would quench his thirst and relieve his exhaustion from the heat. Even so, if one of a family of the warrior caste, etc., has gone forth from a house to a homeless life and having come to the doctrine and discipline taught by the Buddha has thus practiced love, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity, he acquires inward peace, and with inward peace he gains serenity of mind and mental stability. **(Majjhima Nikaya)**